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*Philology as Philosophy:
Giovanni Pontano on Language,
Meaning, and Grammar*

Lodi Nauta

INTRODUCTION:
PONTANO A PHILOSOPHER?

For all their contributions to the empirical study of Latin and Greek, Quattrocento humanists are not generally considered to have been great innovators in the philosophy of language.¹ Unlike the scholastics, who speculated about the relationship between thought, language and the world and developed theories of supposition and signification, humanists were not interested in such theoretical issues. This neglect was of course quite deliberate: the humanist curriculum of the *studia humanitatis* aimed at replacing the theoretical study of language of the scholastics by an inductive, empirical and practical methodology based on a careful study of the great classical authors. It would therefore be ill-advised to expect the humanists to have formulated new theories about meaning or the relationship between the world, thought and language. And yet, even though humanists were no philosophers in the scholastic (and modern analytical) sense of the word, philosophical assumptions and convictions did drive their textual and phil-

¹ E.g. K. Jensen, “*De emendata structura latini sermonis*: The Latin Grammar of Thomas Linacre,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 107: “There is no explicit humanist contribution to the philosophy of language.”

ological studies and had important implications for their wider views on language, history, and culture.

This article aims to illustrate this still undervalued point by examining the views on language by one of the most distinguished humanists of Quattrocento Italy, Giovanni Pontano (1429–1503). I will argue that his views are philosophically interesting and relevant and deserve much more attention than they have received so far.² Focusing on his *Dialogues*, his treatise on conversation (*De sermone*) and some of his moral and astrological works, I will study his views on the origin and development of language, the impact language exercises on thought and life, and the philosophical assumptions that inform his grammatical work. My claim is that his thought on language testifies to an acute, perceptive and fertile mind, and—even though much inspired by Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian—raises ideas on the social, emotive and active functions of language and the intrinsic connection of language and sociability, ideas that historians of philosophy usually believe to have been articulated only in the Enlightenment. As will be pointed out in what follows, Pontano was much indebted to other humanists, in particular Lorenzo Valla, whose views on language, grammar and rhetoric clearly formed the backbone of Pontano's own what he called "Latin philosophy." While he frequently engaged in covert polemics with Valla's *Elegantiae* and some of his opinions, Pontano endorsed the Vallian program of a detailed empirical study of Latin in all its variety, with the notion of *consuetudo* (usage, convention) as central parameter in settling questions of meaning. To the extent that Pontano endorsed the ideals, aims and methodology of Valla, he is an important witness to the ultimate victory of Vallian method, a victory that may look—with hindsight—a historical matter of course but it was a battle still to be fought and won.³ However, Pontano was also a humanist with his own voice, and that voice is worth hearing as this article hopes to show.

THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

In his *De inventione* Cicero famously credits the orator with the coming of civilization: a "great and wise man" assembled primitive men and "trans-

² David Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 100–116; Matthias Roick, *Mercury in Naples. The Moral and Political Thought of Giovanni Pontano* (unpublished diss., Florence, 2009), 137–68. I am grateful to Dr. Roick for allowing me to read his excellent dissertation.

³ C. Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 152;

formed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk through reason and eloquence.”⁴ But neither here nor elsewhere did Cicero become more specific about the early origins of language. Stimulated by the Ciceronian account, Pontano speculates on the question at several places in his work. As a humanist, who spoke and wrote Latin with a fluency that was greatly admired by Erasmus, Pontano was of course mainly interested in the development of Latin—a field of study that was still in its infancy—but his observations had an anthropological ring to them, with implications for language in general.

According to Pontano’s account, the first users of language were primitive people, uncultivated farmers and workmen, who stood in direct contact with nature.⁵ They were poor and their life was difficult. Accordingly, their language was poor as well: not only was their vocabulary limited to those words directly related to their simple life and work conditions, but the few words they did have were rough, unpolished and uncultivated; primal man could care less when it came to well-structured and elegantly pronounced words. Indeed, “barbarous and savage people” are not to be considered as such because of savageness (*feritas*) but because of their uncultivated language.⁶ In a remarkable passage from his work on grammar *De aspiratione*, Pontano writes that “in the beginning words did not drop from heaven but, because nature made men apt to speaking, they assigned names to themselves and to things.”⁷ (Perhaps an allusion to Valla’s words that “analogy did not descend from heaven at man’s creation.”⁸) As primitive men covered themselves with skins or leaves, they did not need (and hence did not have) words for clothes, weaver or loom. Interestingly, Pontano also gives a contemporary example. Acquainted with the recent explorations of new parts of the world, e.g. Columbus’s discovery of the “New Indies,” he mentions the inhabitants of the Canary Islands, recently discov-

David Marsh, “Grammar, Method, and Polemic in Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae*,” *Rinascimento* 19 (1979): 91–116, at 103.

⁴ *De inventione* 1.2.2–3, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 5; a topos in the Greek rhetorical tradition. Cf. *De oratore* 1.8.32–1.9.37 and *De republica* 3.2.3 (going back to Plato, *Philebus* 18B). On ancient ideas on the early origins of language see Deborah Levine Gera, *Ancient Greek Ideas on Speech, Language and Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵ *I dialoghi*, ed. C. Previtera (Florence: Sansoni, 1943), 205; cf. 207.

⁶ *De sermone*, eds. S. Lupi and A. Risicato (Lugano: Thesauri Mundi, 1953), 150.

⁷ I. I. Pontani *opera omnia soluta oratione composita* (Venice, 1518–19), 2:7v–8r; henceforth abbreviated as OO; also in G. Germano, *Il ‘De aspiratione’ di Giovanni Pontano e la cultura del suo tempo* (Naples: Loffredo, 2005), 316.

⁸ Cited from Marsh, “Grammar, Method, and Polemic,” 105.

ered by Spanish pirates, who live almost naked but have an abundant vocabulary concerning those arts they practice.⁹ The inventions of things require new words, just as we now have words for all kinds of arms and weapons, which are recent inventions.¹⁰ Neither nature nor some god (*non naturam aut deum aliquem*) but only men are the inventors of language.

The same view is expressed at the beginning of his *De sermone* where Pontano presupposes an analogy between a new-born individual and primitive man at the beginning of time. Again, the distinction between the earliest phase of Latin and the origins of language more in general cannot always be clearly drawn in Pontano's account. Starting on a clearly Aristotelian note, he asserts that people are social animals by nature, born to live in each other's company.¹¹ From very simple and needy conditions people began to develop language to give expression to feelings and thoughts, and to describe the world around them. The more developed speech is the better man can cope with the necessities of life: "where discourse is greater and more frequent, there is a richer supply of all those things that life lacks, since at birth need is given to all men as companion."¹² Language was thus born in human interactions when primitive men had to find names for their activities, crafts and tools for simple communication.

Speech was of course also used to express one's emotions and feelings. Without developing the point Pontano hints at this aspect in *De aspiratione* where, based on the idea commonly taught by ancient grammarians that interjection reflects the speaker's emotion, he writes that "the most ancient Latins" (*uetustissimos latinos*) hardly used aspiration except for words that directly expressed the speaker's "movements of the soul and emotions" (*animi motus quidam et affectus*), as in exclamation words such as "Heu," "hei" and "heiulo."¹³ Taken together with his other observations, it is not

⁹ *Ibid.*; Germano, *Il 'De aspiration,'* 200 n. 55; L. Monti Sabia, "Echi di scoperte geografiche in opere di Giovanni Pontano," *Columbeis* V, ed. S. Pittaluga (Genoa: University of Genoa, 1993), 283–303.

¹⁰ For a similar position on the need to invent new words for post-classical discoveries see Valla, *Gesta Ferdinandi Regis Aragonum*, ed. O. Besomi (Padua: Antenore, 1973), 195–96.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a1–29; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b10.

¹² *De sermone*, 3. For a similar expression see *De prudentia* 1.8, in OO 1:151r, where Pontano talks about the needy conditions in which man starts life as a newborn baby and only slowly develops its language skills and habits; cf. Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 183–84 on Pontano's turning Aristotle's metaphysical notion of privation as one of the three principles of generation into an anthropological description of the needy condition in which man is born.

¹³ OO 2:3r, and cf. 6v. See e.g. Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticae*, ed. M. Herz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1855–59), 2:90; cf. Jan Pinborg, "Interjektionen und Naturlaute. Petrus Heliae

too far-fetched to say that Pontano locates the origin of language in the affective, emotive and active sphere of human life. At a time when the biblical episode of Adam giving all creatures a name fitting their natures was still an influential idea,¹⁴ this emphasis on the affective, emotive and active origins of language looks fresh and important. While the social, conventional nature of language is clearly a central idea in Valla, this emphasis is absent from his brief remarks on the origins of language.¹⁵

How did it develop from here, from this primitive stage? When life became more diversified, complicated and civilized, language too—and Pontano is now clearly having Latin in mind—grew in complexity and elegance. In some of his grammatical investigations Pontano views this process in a rather literal way: together with the products and crafts that ancient peasants brought into the villages and cities, they also introduced the words they used to refer to their rural products, activities and life conditions, and these words were taken up and acquired new meanings or formed the basis of new words. Pontano explains that, e.g., *cernere* was first used for selecting pulses and fruits, but gave later rise to words such as *certare* (fight) and *decernere* (distinguish)—“senatorial and imperial verbs” (*senatoria atque imperatoria verba*)—from which came *certamina* (fights) and *decreta* (decree).¹⁶ *Pangere* (fix, e.g. of trees) came to be used, e.g., in the sense of composing verse (and also to conclude, and to stipulate). *Serere* (sow) gave rise to series of all kinds of things as can be seen in related words such as *sermo* (speech), *sermocinatio* (conversation), *disserere* (discuss) and *disertus* (wellspoken, skilful); *exarare* (plough) was later applied to letters and books. Pontano’s systematic attempt to trace back words to the rural and

und ein Problem der antiken und mittelalterlichen Sprachphilosophie,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 22 (1961): 117–38.

¹⁴ W. P. Klein, *Am Anfang war das Wort: Theorie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Elemente frühneuzeitlichen Sprachbewusstseins* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992).

¹⁵ Valla, *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie*, ed. G. Zippel (Padua: Antenore, 1982), 123: “once they knew things, man invented sounds, which they adapted in order to stand for things, and the first (*primus*) of them was Adam.” On Valla see M. Tavoni, *Latino, grammatica, volgare: Storia di una questione umanistica* (Padua: Antenore, 1984), 117–62. Salvatore Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo e teologia* (Florence: Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1972); idem, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo, Riforma, e Contrariforma* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 2002); and Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), esp. 53–58 on the question on the origin of language in Valla.

¹⁶ *Dialoghi*, 207–8; cf. 190–92, with many more examples. *Cernere* is mentioned by Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 7.9.2 as an example of a verb with different meanings, hence as a possible source for ambiguity.

simple life conditions of primitive man is an impressive example of what we may call his genealogical approach to language and its development in close connection to changing life conditions.

Language not only became richer and more complex, but also more refined and more elegant, effected by e.g. “the shortening of syllables and letters.” Poets were vital in this process: “they were the first among the learned that came forward.”¹⁷ Poetry must therefore be considered as a very early form of language. A gifted poet himself, it is not surprising to find Pontano underscoring the roles traditionally ascribed to poets in ancient society: poets were seers (*vates*), priests, the singers of tales, the propounders of laws, and generally those who gave form to all kinds of knowledge and what was important to society. Hence, philosophers, physicists, and orators alike, Pontano claims, took their precepts from Homer; Numa, king of the Romans, had his own verses on the gods frequently sung to the people, bringing “that very savage people to more human manners and a greater worship of God.”¹⁸ Empedocles sang about the natural world, and so on. For Pontano then the poetical style is the most ancient one, “from which all later types of discourse have sprung”, as comparison in particular with the two sister arts, oratory and history, show.¹⁹ Unlike Valla, who had claimed that history is superior to poetry, Pontano reversed the relationship between poetry and history. History, Pontano argues, is poetry in prose form, and rhetoric too borrows much from poetry for effective and persuasive speech.²⁰ Pontano clearly favors poetry as standing historically at the beginning of civilization.

LANGUAGE, HUMAN SOCIABILITY, AND THE PASSIONS

Pontano’s emphasis on the affective, active and social role of language at the beginning of times naturally recurs when he turns his attention to the

¹⁷ *Dialoghi*, 238; 205, 208 (shortening of letters and syllables); cf. 238–39: “expurgatis rudioribus illis vetustatis numeris,” and 139: “Latinitatem musicarent.” Cf. Cicero, *Orator*, esp. 140–74; B. A. Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 118–19. Cf. Frederick Solmsen, “Drei Rekonstruktionen zur antiken Rhetorik und Poetik,” *Hermes* 67 (1932): 151–54.

¹⁸ *Dialoghi*, 238; cf. *De sermone*, 62 (the sayings of the poets considered as oracles) and *Dialoghi*, 233–34 where Pontano, apparently not thinking of this very early stage of poetry, says that the public of both the historian and the poet consists of learned men, unlike the orator who speaks to the common people and to judges. On Pontano’s poetry, see Carol Kidwell, *Pontano: Poet and Prime Minister* (London: Duckworth, 1991).

¹⁹ *Dialoghi*, 238.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 238; 199; and also 202; see Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35–37.

bond between language and human sociability. The social bond that speech forges was of course an age-old theme, one that regained prominence in humanist thought. One of Pontano's most programmatic statements is at the beginning of *De sermone*, and though the passage is frequently alluded to in the literature, its originality has perhaps not been sufficiently recognized.²¹ It starts conventionally enough. Nature has endowed man with reason and language. By reason men come to know things, by speech

they preserve and uphold the social bond [*conciliation*] that nature has placed in man, and by which they unfold and express what reason dictates, whether regarding useful and serious matters or out of play and pleasure. Without speech reason is an imperfect and an utterly feeble faculty, especially because man's life consists of actions, public meetings and assemblies. Speech is the principal bond that ties the entire human society together [*totiusque humanae societatis vinculum*].

Speech, Pontano continues, is an essential condition for pursuing a virtuous and commodious life: "Just as reason is the leader and the master in directing all kinds of action, so speech is the servant of all those things which, having been thought of in the mind and examined in reasoning, are brought out in public, since we are born as social beings [*sociabiles*] to live in a crowd [*multitudine*]." Speech is "the translator of the mind, a kind of instrument of reason, in as much as deliberations, counsels, and finally reasonings themselves consist of discourse [*dissertationibus*] and discourse itself of words;" hence "speech is as an instrument for reason and it provides, so to speak, reason with its material [*materiam*] with which it is engaged." The same expressions recur frequently in other chapters, e.g. in chapter 13, where it is said that speech is the bond of society and that "we are born and taught to cultivate society [*ad quam colendam nati atque educati sumus*]." ²²

This programmatic statement—Aristotelian and Ciceronian in spirit,

²¹ *De sermone*, 3–4 for what follows. For a brief paraphrase see Charles Trinkaus, "The Question of Truth in Renaissance Rhetoric and Anthropology," in *Renaissance Eloquence*, ed. J. J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 217; Victoria Kahn, "Giovanni Pontano's Rhetoric and Prudence," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 16 (1983): 16–34, at 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 20. Similar passages in *De prudentia*, e.g. 1.21 and 1.25 (OO 1:157v and 160r), quoted by Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 76.

to be sure²³—contains several interesting elements. First, we find Pontano recognizing and explicitly commenting on the intrinsic connection between sociability and language. One of the sources that must have inspired Pontano to postulate this bond is the classical description of oratorical “action,” i.e. the delivery of a speech. Central to successful oratory is the idea that people naturally recognize and instinctively respond to each other’s emotions. As Cicero writes in *De oratore*: “action, which by its own powers displays the movements of the soul, affects all mankind; for the minds of all men are excited by the same emotions which they recognize in others, and indicate in themselves by the same tokens.”²⁴ Pontano was of course familiar with Cicero’s account of *actio* as his dialogue *Actius* in particular testifies,²⁵ but he saw this psychological mechanism of mutual recognition of emotions in a perspective wider than oratory, in line with his general aim in *De sermone* to deal with common discourse (*oratio communis*) rather than formal oratory and rhetoric.²⁶ The mechanism is universal and based on what Pontano describes as our instinctive desire to be kind and benevolent to each other—a “natural movement” (*naturalis commotio*).²⁷ The term “natural” indeed abounds in the works of Pontano: men are naturally inclined to socialize, to work together, to live in community. For Pontano this natural affinity is “a given,” an irreducible aspect of human nature. Human passions are therefore not to be scorned; they arise out of “our natural movements and impulses,” implanted in us to enable us to live a social life and work together.²⁸ Pontano does not restrict this natural affinity to human beings. In his astrological work *De rebus coelestibus* he speaks about “an agreement among the planets and (as I would

²³ E.g. *De officiis* 1.41.149: “totius generis hominum conciliationem et consociationem.” Cf. Eugenio Garin, “Noterelle sulla filosofia del Rinascimento,” *Rinascimento* 2 (1951): 321 on the double tradition of Aristotle and Cicero in Renaissance thought.

²⁴ *De oratore* 3.59.223, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), 179; cf. *ibid.*, 2.44.189–90; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6.2.26.

²⁵ *Dialoghi*, 221, and 232 and elsewhere; cf. L. Monti Sabia, *Pontano e la storia. Dal De bello Neapolitano all’ Actius* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995), 4.

²⁶ *De sermone*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41. The term “commotio” is used by Cicero in *De inventione* 2.19 and *De oratore* 2.53.216 but with different meanings.

²⁸ *De fortitudine*, OO 1:51v–52r; S. Lupi, “Il *De sermone* di Gioviano Pontano,” *Filologia Romanza* 2 (1955): 372 (Pontano’s “naturalismo”). F. Tateo, *Astrologia e moralità in Giovanni Pontano* (Bari: Adriatica, 1960), 170–71. Cf. Pontano, *De prudentia*, 173: “Nostrum autem est et naturae ipsius uti potestate, ac muneribus, et affectus ita sequi intra gyrum rationis illos ut contineamus”, rightly called by Tateo “questa valorizzazione della tendenza naturale” (*ibid.*, 170 n. 18). Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 192–93: “we have no inherent faculty or passion that would make us good or evil by nature,” paraphrasing *De prudentia*, OO 1:174v.

say) a certain consensus and familiar affection, and (as the Greeks call it) a *sympathia*. This also happens in civil life.”²⁹

Pontano does more than merely repeating and underscoring the social nature of language. Of course, the intrinsic connection between language and sociability was an insight that lay at the heart of humanist reflection on language,³⁰ but Pontano’s emphasis on language as the natural vehicle by which man expresses feelings, emotions, and beliefs gives it an interesting twist. And even if Pontano is re-working themes from classical rhetoric and humanist thinking on language, such creative re-working is part and parcel of intellectual history and it is what makes it so interesting. In stressing the natural, instinctive mechanism of the mutual recognition of emotions, Pontano expresses an idea that came to full maturity in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Indeed, historians of Enlightenment thought have credited “their” philosophers with championing the essential role of fellow-feeling in human affairs.³¹ Based on the classical rhetorical descriptions of “action” (delivery) that, as we have just seen, had also inspired Pontano, eighteenth-century philosophers such as Condillac, David Hume, and Adam Smith underscored the sympathetic identification between orator and audience, and indeed between human beings in general.³² The term “sympathy,” often used by these authors, seems to have been introduced by Bernard Lamy (1640–1715). As Aersleff writes: “Classical rhetoric did not have a term for the mysterious something that provides humanity with a

²⁹ Quoted by Charles Trinkaus, “The Astrological Cosmos and Rhetorical Culture of Giovanni Gioviano Pontano,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985): 455.

³⁰ Cf. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla*, and my “Lorenzo Valla and the Rise of Humanist Dialectic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 193–210, at 196. On similar views by J. L. Vives see Peter Mack, “Vives’s Contributions to Rhetoric and Dialectic,” in *A Companion to J. L. Vives*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 227–76, esp. 273–74.

³¹ Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 43–85. Hans Aarsleff, “Introduction,” in Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. and ed. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xii–xiv, according to whom the dominant paradigm in the seventeenth century was “largely Augustinian and orthodox,” even “though the seventeenth century was the great age of French eloquence.” Ulrich Ricken, *Linguistics, Anthropology and Philosophy in the French Enlightenment: Language Theory and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³² E.g. Hume, *Treatise* III, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 575–76. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1982), 11. On the rhetorical background of Hume’s notion of sympathy see Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 46. See also Peter Jones, *Hume’s Sentiments: Their Ciceroian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982).

means of universal communication, but Lamy suddenly supplied it in the fourth edition of his *Rhetoric* [from 1699] (. . .) It is a bit of a puzzle how Lamy came upon the term. It is Greek and its philosophical home was in Stoic philosophy.”³³ Whatever its origins, the term caught on, and in Hume and Smith it became the foundation of a naturalistic account of the development of morality. Without wanting to detract in any way from the importance of these new developments in eighteenth-century philosophy, it is worth remarking—since, as far as I know, it has not been observed before—that Pontano already applied the astrological word “sympathy” to civil life, and—more importantly—that we find in him a similar emphasis on language as the natural expression of man’s social nature, the natural vehicle by which man expresses feelings, emotions, and beliefs. From the same classical sources that inspired eighteenth-century thinkers, Pontano derived a picture of fellow-feeling as an essential instinct in man’s nature on which sociability grows. Obviously, he does not develop this idea into a theory of moral sentiments as did Hume and Smith, but the core intuition, I think, is similar, and philosophically relevant.

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

The second aspect of language that we encounter in this passage of *De sermone* focuses on the verbalization of what is going on in the mind of the individual speaker rather than on the socializing effects of language. The view of language as an instrument of thought is of course wholly traditional; it is the framework in which language had been regarded since Antiquity, with Aristotle’s distinction between natural concepts and conventional words at the beginning of *De interpretatione* as *locus classicus*.³⁴ It is therefore hardly surprising that Pontano uses such images as instrument, servant, translator and matter, and that he calls reason its leader and master. This implies a rather passive, dependent and purely executive role for language; language is here regarded as a mere conveyer of ready-made prior thoughts, an outward manifestation of what is going on inside.

Pontano’s words, however, can also be read as containing the germ of

³³ Aarsleff, “Introduction,” xxi–xxii.

³⁴ On the comparison of language to a “clothing” for thought in authors close in date to Pontano see R. A. Hall, “Linguistic Theory in the Italian Renaissance,” *Language* 12 (1936): 98 n. 12, referring to Cinquecento authors such as J. C. Scaliger, Bembo, Varchi, and Tolomei. On the predominance of the Aristotelian paradigm see M.-L. Demonet, *Les Voix du Signe: Nature et origine de langage à la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 1992).

a different, much more active view of language—a view that has also been ascribed to Valla, though this has been highly controversial.³⁵ So when Pontano states that “reasonings consist of discourse [*dissertationibus*] and discourse itself of words” and hence that “speech provides reason with its matter [*materiam*],” it might be tempting to interpret him as believing that thinking is done with and in words, and that speech penetrates into the inner workings of the mind. Reason is called the leader and master and speech its servant, but the implication of Pontano’s statement that “without language reason remains utterly powerless and feeble” is exactly the opposite: it is the servant who actually rules the master. It is as if Pontano endorses what the modern philosopher Max Black has called “the model of the melody” (language as intrinsically bound with thought and constitutive of it) in opposition to “the model of the garment” (language as a mere container of thought) that, as we just saw, is present in the very same passage.³⁶ It is doubtful, however, that Pontano wanted to go further and argue that thinking comes to a full stop when it lacks speech as its *interpres* and *instrumentum* (its mouthpiece, spokesman, vehicle, instrument). In his *De rebus coelestibus*, for instance, he gives an astrological explanation of the phenomenon of stuttering and lipping, without suggesting (rightly so, of course) that such impediments in speech are signs of a lack of cognitive powers.³⁷ In general, he seems to suppose the traditional distinction between thinking and expressing one’s thought, and such a distinction is also implied in Pontano’s observation that we sometimes talk quicker than we think—an important asset in witty conversation, which is a major theme of *De sermone*.³⁸

A critical reader could detect a certain tension between these statements, but for Pontano it is quite natural to think of language both in terms of an instrument for thought and as an active, shaping force with a consid-

³⁵ See next note.

³⁶ *The Labyrinth of Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 86–91. Richard Waswo’s argument in his *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) that Renaissance authors such as Valla were struggling toward formulating a “theory of the melody” has met with severe criticism; see John Monfasani, “Was Valla an Ordinary Language Philosopher?,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 309–23. On the whole debate see my *In Defense of Common Sense*, 269–91.

³⁷ *De rebus coelestibus* X, OO 3:251r–252r, where Pontano explains stuttering as a result of too much bodily dryness or too much humidity, ultimately caused by planetary constellations.

³⁸ *Dialoghi*, 227–28 and 269: “cogitatione tantum concepta post voce enuntietur.” Cf. *De sermone*, 117 and 118. Also *De prudentia* 1.31, OO 1:164v, quoted by Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 95.

erable degree of autonomy. The reason is not far to seek. Standing in the rhetorical tradition of Cicero and Quintilian, and a brilliant writer and poet himself, Pontano shares with his classical authorities the basic conviction that reason and eloquence are two sides of the same coin, that thought and language are intimately interwoven. Cicero had famously said in *De oratore*: “Eloquence is one of the supreme virtues [. . .], which, after compassing a knowledge of facts, gives verbal expression to the thoughts and purposes of the mind in such a manner as to have the power of driving the hearers forward in any direction in which it has applied its weight.”³⁹ And in the next sentence he speaks of “this method of attaining and of expressing thought, this faculty of speaking,” that “was designated wisdom by the ancient Greeks.” Here too we see several functions that a modern philosopher might want to distinguish being mentioned in the same breath: the expression of one’s thought, the communication of it to the public, and the intention of being understood in such and such a way, aiming at a particular effect in the audience. Cicero does not spell out here the basic assumption on which his plea for a union of wisdom and eloquence is based, namely that clear language is a *sine qua non* for clear thinking, probably because it seems such an intuitively plausible assumption. The models of “the garment” and “the melody” fuse together in one account of a seamless interrelation between thinking and verbal expression.

This conviction was central to the humanist program, and found influential formulations, e.g., in Petrarch, Bruni, and Valla. As Bruni wrote in his *On the Study of Literature* from 1424: “The reading of clumsy and corrupt writers imbues the reader with their own vices, and infests his mind with similar corruptions.”⁴⁰ Valla was often quite explicit about the causal connection, stating at various places in his works that a lack of knowledge of classical Latin leads to muddled thinking, incorrect reasoning and abstruse theorizing.⁴¹ Similarly, this humanist conviction informed much of what Pontano says about language and grammar—whether it is about the impact of language on our emotional life, about the union of eloquence and philosophy, the relationship between Greek and Latin, the adequacy of *verba* to express the *res*, literary style of historians and poets, or the importance of grammatical investigations. All these discussions are premised on

³⁹ Cicero, *De oratore* 3.14.55, trans. H. Rackham, 43–45. Elaine Fantham, *The Roman World of Cicero’s De Oratore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 237–86.

⁴⁰ In *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, eds. and trans. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins and David Thompson (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1987), 241.

⁴¹ Valla, *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 5, 145, 278, and elsewhere.

the belief—not always explicitly articulated—that language does more than just registering preexistent thoughts and things but actively shapes the way we think about, describe and perhaps even see the world. This is not to ascribe an extreme form of linguistic idealism to Pontano—that language constitutes the world or that the world exists in so far as it is spoken about (vague claims, to say the least)—but it is to say that for Pontano, as for his source of inspiration Valla, elegance and semantic precision are essential aids in making aspects of the world “visible,” something which an allegedly less precise language than Latin would not be able to do.

Perhaps the most direct way in which we feel the impact of language on our life is at the level of emotions. To move one’s audience was of course one of the three official functions of the orator, and being a poet himself Pontano hardly needed the classical accounts in Cicero and Quintilian to recognize the immense power words can have over human life.⁴² Words, he says, can evoke all kinds of emotions in us, and can become so great that they seem even “to dominate our very minds” (*dominari in animis ipsis nostris*).⁴³ In the dialogue *Aegidius*, he even compares the effect of human speech with God’s creative act.⁴⁴ Just by his Word God created the world and man (“let there be light,” etc.), and later, “when mankind was on the road to perdition,” God sent his Son—again, his Word—to save mankind. Hence, it should not surprise us, Pontano concludes, that human words too can produce astonishing effects such as bringing people back to life who were already standing with one foot in the grave or—on the contrary—bringing people to commit suicide. Indeed, “there is no greater power and strength in man than that which consists of words.” Because this power is potentially so strong, it is vitally important that eloquence is closely connected to wisdom, otherwise we shall have put, as Cicero had said, “weapons into the hands of madmen.”⁴⁵

This leads us directly to a second theme: the plea for a reunion of eloquence and philosophy. Whereas Cicero had attributed the severance between the tongue and the brain to the rise of philosophical sects after Socrates, Pontano follows Valla in situating the start of this process after the fall of the Roman Empire, when in particular “the pursuit of eloquence

⁴² Cicero, *De oratore* 1.8.30–33; 3.14.55, and elsewhere.

⁴³ *De rebus coelestibus* XIII, OO 3:198v.

⁴⁴ *Dialoghi*, 271 for this and the following quotations; *ibid.*, 221; cf. B. Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles in der Dichtungstheorie des Cinquecento* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 52–53

⁴⁵ *De oratore* 3.14.55.

died out completely, and hardly a trace of grammar itself remained.”⁴⁶ The contentious philosophers are to blame: “dialectic has been corrupted, first by the Germans and the French, and then by Italians as well, and it is in dialectic that the philosophers still wreak the greatest havoc.”⁴⁷ In an analysis that owes much to Bruni’s *Dialogues*, Valla’s *Elegantiae* and the works of other humanists of the earlier Quattrocento, Pontano thus attributes the decline of philosophy to faulty translations and interpretations of Aristotle, and to a general sloppiness about words.⁴⁸ This negligence has resulted in the belief that Latin, rather than being “an abundantly rich language” that it is, is a poor language, at least for doing philosophy, and that we cannot render the force and meaning of Greek words into Latin or in a meaningful way (*nec Latine . . . nec significanter*).⁴⁹ Of course we can, Pontano says, endorsing a position already forcefully argued by his predecessors: whatever can be said in Greek can be said in Latin, and sometimes even better.⁵⁰ As Pontano frequently says, words can be more or less “adequate,” “appropriate,” “proper,” “fitting,” “significant” (in the sense of covering its meaning), and he also speaks of the “nature of a word” by which he means its proper meaning.⁵¹

The whole point of hitting on the right word, however, presupposes that there is preexistent referent (a person, a quality, a concept, a past event etc.) that can be captured more or less adequately by the linguistic expression. But this does not mean that language is just registering what is already there. In his important discussion of history and the historian’s style, to

⁴⁶ *Dialoghi*, 259–260; cf. 231. Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue*, 115. Valla, *Elegantiae*, preface to Book I.

⁴⁷ *Dialoghi*, 15, trans. Marsh, *Quattrocento Dialogue*, 115. For Valla’s major critique of scholastic dialectic see Valla’s *Dialectical Disputations*, ed. and trans. by Brian P. Copenhaver and Lodi Nauta (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). For a detailed discussion see Peter Mack, *Renaissance Argument: Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 22–116 and my *In Defense of Common Sense*, 211–68.

⁴⁸ *Dialoghi*, 15.

⁴⁹ *Dialoghi*, 283–84.

⁵⁰ *Dialoghi*, 281–82. Cicero, *De finibus* 3.5. Bruni, *On the Correct Way to Translate*, trans. in *Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, 217–29, esp. 228; as Hankins writes (*ibid.*, 11): Bruni believed “that the Greek and Latin languages were, if not exactly interchangeable sets of signs for identical concepts, in any case fundamentally equivalent vehicles of expression;” cf. Paul Botley, *Latin Translation in the Renaissance: The Theory and Practice of Leonardo Bruni, Giannozzo Manetti and Desiderius Erasmus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–62. Valla, *Repastinatio*, 4.

⁵¹ *Dialoghi*, 271: “quae vox, [i.e. *privatus*] suapte natura adversatur *publico*”; Pontano frequently says that a word can express something “recte,” “proprie,” “Latine” (or “Romane”) and “significanter.”

which we have already alluded above, Pontano shows how style is all important in bringing to light the connections between things, and hence, albeit implicitly, how language structures the way we see the past, making it “visible.” Following Cicero, Pontano states that *historia* consists of *res* and *verba*, things and words. It is not that the words bring order to a chaotic and formless matter, for things themselves, Pontano says, exhibit order and disposition: they follow each other in succession, being connected by causes and effects, by motives and aims, and so forth.⁵² The ontological status of this order is not entirely clear in Pontano’s account: sometimes he refers to the order of events as they occurred in the past and links such an order with the order of nature (*natura*), but at other times he writes as if this order is the product of the historian who shows the connections between the individual events by describing their causes and effects as well as the motives of the historical agents, the wars, the lands and cities and all the other elements that make up the historical narrative.⁵³ In spite of some ambiguity in terminology—he speaks of *ordo*, *enarratio*, *dispositio*, *series*⁵⁴—the basic idea seems clear enough: the historian’s task is to bring order in his material, by clearly conceiving how all the events fit together into a coherent whole, offering explanations of historical events, distributing praise and blame, and using such words that are fitting and employing a style that is varied and elegant but never forced and artificial.⁵⁵ Pontano stresses the affinity between the style of the poet and that of the historian, following Quintilian in speaking of history as *carmen solutum*,⁵⁶ but history is of course also closely related to the art of oratory, in which arguments are found, the material ordered and given an elegant and persuasive verbal expression. Both the rhetorician and the historian must know how to describe things so vividly—by conjuring up vivid mental images—that the

⁵² *Dialoghi*, 217; cf. *ibid.*, 229 and elsewhere.

⁵³ *Dialoghi*, 212, 215, 217, 229–30, and 212–13, 227, 229. Cf. G. Cotroneo, *I trattatisti dell’ “Ars historica”* (Naples: Giannini, 1971), 87–120, without however an analysis of this tension. See also R. Black, “The New Laws of History,” *Renaissance Studies* 1 (1987): 130–32 and 139–41.

⁵⁴ E.g. *Dialoghi*, 217.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.; Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 199: “historiam censeant poeticam quasi quandam solutam” and 194. On Pontano’s indebtedness to George of Trebizond’s *Rhetoric*, see G. Ferraù, *Pontano critico* (Messina: Centro di studi umanistici, 1983), 73–105; Monti Sabia, *Pontano e la storia*, 7. But in stressing the close affinity between the historian and the poet Pontano follows Quintilian (*Inst. orat.* 10.1.31) more than Cicero (and George of Trebizond); Cicero considered history an *opus oratorium* (*De legibus* 1.5, *De oratore* 2.9.36).

audience or readers felt they were witness to the scene or events. In his detailed analyses of the writings of Livy and Sallust, Pontano's main point is that language is the cement of the historical narrative and that without the right words and stylistic features such as *celeritas*, *brevitas* and *elegantia* the past cannot come to life and cannot be put "before our eyes" (*ponere ante oculos*), that is, the mind's eye—a traditional expression that Pontano borrows from Cicero and Quintilian.⁵⁷

Language thus takes an active role in shaping the way we see reality, past and present. As said, it would go too far to argue that Pontano actually conflates the levels of things and linguistic description; his discussion presupposes such a distinction, yet it also emphasizes time and again the formative role of the historian in creating historical reality by describing the connections between the *res*—a task that requires all the semantic precision and elegance of the Latin language. Indeed, *res* and *verba* are two sides of the same coin: "the individual words almost completely encompass or comprehend the things."⁵⁸

"OUR LATIN PHILOSOPHY": GRAMMAR AND SEMANTIC PRECISION

To use the right word, the right construction and the right style requires a thorough familiarity with the Latin language. It is of course axiomatic for the humanist Pontano that Latin is such a semantically precise and elegant language that we do not need, for instance, to leave Greek words untranslated or use inept Latin terminology in our moral and scholarly disquisitions. As noticed, Pontano followed Valla in seeing the decline of philosophical learning to be the result of the dearth of eloquence and the neglect of Latin. In particular dialectic and grammar had suffered from the philosophers' lack of attention to language—a major theme in the work of Valla.⁵⁹ Fortunately, in his own time scholars have begun to turn their backs on these faulty translations, Pontano says, and he expresses the hope that, before he departs from this world, he may see "our Latin philosophy expounding its topics with a more refined style and elegance, and that aban-

⁵⁷ E.g. *Dialoghi*, 193, 219 (twice) and 221. See Cicero, *De oratore* 3.5.19 and Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* 6.2.32 and 10.7.15; for George of Trebizond see Monti Sabia, *Pontano e la storia*, 5.

⁵⁸ As the interlocutor comments on a passage in Sallust: "singula verba res pene complectuntur singulas" (*Dialoghi*, 212).

⁵⁹ See n. 47.

doing this contentious manner of debating it may adopt a more tranquil form of speech and discussion, using its own proper and purely Roman vocabulary.”⁶⁰ What Pontano in effect is saying is not just that Latin is a beautiful language and that for aesthetic reasons we should stick to the usage of the venerable, ancient authorities—this, of course, is true as well—but that it is an exceptionally rich and precise language for describing, or even evoking, reality, whether that concerns our systems of beliefs, ethical maxims, or scientific and philosophical ideas. For Pontano the numerous and subtle distinctions embodied in Latin had not just been made arbitrarily but were drawn because men found them worth drawing. Its stock of words and grammatical distinctions had developed over a long period of time, and they should not be tampered with, at least when there is no clear reason for doing so, for Pontano felt no qualms to coin a word or two himself.

The study of grammar is therefore a vital aspect of Pontano’s “Latin philosophy.” Investigations of words and grammatical distinctions are essential for clarifying things or concepts. In what follows I will give several examples that convey an impression of his method and aims. These methods and aims are certainly not original with Pontano. Valla showed the way in his *Elegantiae* how to carry out such investigations. This program however had to be defended, modified (if necessary) and expanded, and this is what Pontano tried to do, agreeing with Valla’s methodology but also correcting him “on Valla’s own terms.”⁶¹ Moreover, Pontano also opens up new themes to which the Vallian method is applied, such as a subtle examination of the language of social discourse in his *De sermone*, to which we shall come in a moment.

In the dialogue *Aegidius* the interlocutors discuss mistranslations of some philosophical terms.⁶² The term *privatio* (privation), for instance, which is the third principle of generation (along with form and matter) that Aristotle had distinguished, is criticized as being not an appropriate word to express the corresponding concept. *Carere* (and *carentia*) fulfills this role much better, as Cicero’s explanation of this verb testifies. *Carere* indicates that something is missing, that something is needed for completion, e.g. matter that is in need of form. In spite of Cicero’s authority, however, *privatio* has come into use, and we may therefore accept it, heedful of Horace’s dictum that “in usage’s hands lies the judgment, the right and the rule of

⁶⁰ *Dialoghi*, 280, trans. Marsh, *Quattrocento Dialogue*, 107.

⁶¹ Marsh, “Grammar, Method, and Polemic,” 113.

⁶² For the examples in this paragraph see *Dialoghi*, 271–73 (*privatio*, *carentia*), 280–82 (ἔξις, *habitus*), 282–84 (ζῴωσις, *complexio*).

speech,” even though the semantic associations might take us in the wrong direction.⁶³ Next, *dispositio* is criticized as a translation of the Aristotelian concept *ἕξις* (*hexis*), meaning inclination, inner state or attitude. *Dispositio* means ordering and setting things in order (vine grapes, soldiers etc.), which has nothing to do with such an inner state (e.g., being inclined to be courageous or generous). An extensive survey of the semantic contexts in which these and related words are being used must show that Latin has all the resources to make the necessary, fine distinctions in meaning. A third example concerns Greek *κρᾶσις* (*krasis*, mixing, blending), which was erroneously translated as *complexio*. The Latin word means embracing, encompassing, comprising rather than mixing. Again, an impressive survey of related Latin words meaning mixing, blending, uniting, etc. follows to show how subtle differences in things (or aspects of things) can be expressed only if one knows the nuances of words.⁶⁴

Though particularly known for its “theory of wit,” Pontano’s *De sermone* also offers perhaps the best example of his “Latin philosophy.” Here he examines in detail the social virtues and vices as they manifest themselves in conversation and social intercourse. Indebted to Cicero and Aristotle but in the end going beyond his authorities, Pontano discusses the social virtue of wit, for which he coins a new noun *facetudo*, meaning wittiness or facetiousness.⁶⁵ But in defining this virtue Pontano discusses a number of related terms which are aspects of it or are somehow related to it, yet not identical with it: *amicitia* (friendship), *comitas* (courtesy, affability), *lepidus* (charming, witty), *salsus* (salty, witty), *festivus* (humorous), *humanus* (humane, cultured), *urbanus* (elegant, polished, witty), *verus* (true), and so forth. Without discussing Pontano’s arguments, the following gives an idea of the semantic precision he tries to achieve by, for instance, arguing that *humanitas* is not quite the same as *comitas*, *popularitas* (courting of popular favor)

⁶³ *Ars Poetica*, 70–72, often alluded to by humanists, e.g. Valla, *Repastinatio*, 148.

⁶⁴ On the related medical term “*εὖκρᾶσία*” (*bene constitutus*), see *De prudentia* 1.17, OO 1:153v, discussed by Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 75. See also Ferrau, *Pontano critico*, 84 n. 1, who shows that Pontano is referring to George of Trebizond.

⁶⁵ *De sermone*, 19; the etymology he gives however is Donatus’s (in the commentary to Terence, *Eunuchus*, 427), as noted by G. Luck, “*Vir facetus*: A Renaissance Ideal,” *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958): 118 n. 39. Luck rightly calls it a “new social and aesthetic ideal,” (118) and stresses Pontano’s “ability to think through independently and critically an accepted ancient theory, and to modify it in an essential point” (117). The following paragraph is based esp. on *De sermone*, book I; the titles of the chapters clearly indicate the virtues and vices under discussion. On the title, which cannot be found in the autograph, see Lupi, “Il *De sermone*,” 393 n. 1 and Luck, “*Vir facetus*,” 118–19. For these words in Cicero see Krostenko, *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance*, *passim*.

not quite the same as *comitas*, *festivus* more restrictive in scope than *urbanus*; *urbanus* being (slightly) different from *facetis*, that *verus* (true) and *verax* (truthful) are not the same, and so forth. The corresponding vices also receive detailed attention, and subtle differences between various kinds of flattery, garrulity or prolixity, and verbosity are explained. Thus, there are many species of flatterers (*adulator*), and several types of *captatores* (people reaching eagerly after something); *verbosus* (verbose) is not quite the same as *loquax* (talkative), and the latter is close to but not identical with *nugator* (jester, braggart); *litigiosus* (quarrelsome) is not quite the same as *contentiosus* (contentious); *arrogantia* (presumption, arrogance) is not quite the same as *ostentatio* (ostentation), and the latter is close but not identical to *iactatio* (boasting). It is important to make these distinctions, Pontano frequently says, to make things appear “more clearly” (*distinctius*), more “lucidly” or “to understand things better,” so that we avoid talking cross purposes, for “confusion and uncertainty arise from words.”⁶⁶ He therefore frequently looks for the term that characterizes (a) the thing itself, (b) the corresponding virtue/vice and (c) the person who exhibits the virtue/vice, e.g. *contentio*, *contentiositas*, *contentiosus* or *veritas*, *veracitas*, *verax*. He is eager to coin a word if none seems to be available; e.g. *rixatio* (brawling) of which the corresponding term is in use (*rixator*), and *facetudo* (or *faceties*) itself.⁶⁷ Sometimes, however, no term is suggested, and then Pontano is content to note, as Aristotle himself sometimes did too, that we do not have a word for, e.g., excessive taciturnity or for the mean between quarrelsome (*contentiosus*) and flattery (*adulatio*). And in his search for the important virtue of *mediocritas* that Aristotle had left unnamed, Pontano suggests *comitas* (courtesy, affability) but notices that some might prefer to leave it unnamed. However, as long as we see the what and how (*quae* and *qualis*) of the virtue, Pontano does not want to insist on this point.⁶⁸

Building on, and also at times correcting, Valla’s empirical-inductive methodology, Pontano’s explorations testify to the high level of semantic precision at which he is aiming. His semantic surveys take on an enhanced significance:⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 and 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 (*rixatio*) and 19 (*facetudo*). Cf. Luck, “*Vir facetis*” on Pontano’s indebtedness to Aristotle. Cf. Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 192: “Throughout his works, Pontano kept to the threefold scheme of middle, defect, and excess and corroborated it on a linguistic level by giving a name to those virtues and vices that Aristotle had not labelled;” Lupi, “*Il De sermone*,” 377.

⁶⁸ E.g. *De sermone*, 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 33–34; Marsh, “Grammar, Method, and Polemic,” 111–15; Roick, *Mercury in Naples*, 118–30.

both poets and writers of human affairs and of nature give words to things (whence they are called adjectives) by which they declare, explain and define [*finiunt*] properties and names. For when they say that man is an animal, and rational and mortal as well, they define man himself and declare which substance he is. Well then, do not poets reveal the quality of arms, rest and fields, when they call rest “placid,” arms “horrible” and Ausonia “fertile”? [. . .] And when they call limbs “huge” and seas “wide,” what do they want to signify other than the breadth and size of the limbs and the seas? In the same manner, those who write about morals define [*terminent*] our actions, which constitute our customs and virtues, by giving words to them.

Pontano’s point is not the trivial or even tautological one that we require words to describe the natural or human world. The underlying assumption is clearly that in marking the boundaries (*terminare*) of things (including human actions), words enable us to distinguish aspects of reality in the first place. Only a full grasp of the nuances of words enables us to describe man’s multifaceted experience of the world. Such a view is of course founded on the belief—surely questionable—that an impoverished language lacking sufficient resources to make the subtle differences between e.g. different moral qualities or actions would easily lead to a blurring of such differences and distinctions.⁷⁰ For Pontano, a speaker who uses *arrogantia* for *ostentatio* or *verbositas* for *loquacitas*, will find it difficult to make the conceptual distinction in the first place.

CONCLUSION: HUMANISM AND THE CANON OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The argument that I have tried to develop in this article has a wider significance, for the case of Pontano, however immensely interesting in itself, does not stand alone. Uncovering the philosophical assumptions and implications in the work of a humanist like Pontano, without of course anachronistically attributing to him ideas and concepts he could not have had, calls for a serious qualification of a still influential view that human-

⁷⁰ See my “Linguistic Relativity and the Humanist Imitation of Classical Latin,” in *Language and Cultural Change: Aspects of the Study and Use of Language in the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Lodi Nauta (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 173–86.

ists were no philosophers at all, and that historians of mainstream philosophy can thus safely leave the humanists to (literary) historians and Neo-Latinists. It is true that scholars in the wake of Eugenio Garin have strongly defended—against such a predominantly literary interpretation by P. O. Kristeller and many others—the philosophical importance of humanism but the terms in which they have frequently done so—e.g., “a new philosophy of man” with all its associated values or new theories of truth and meaning—have proven to be highly controversial.⁷¹ Humanism is of course an essentially contested concept. But even without taking a stance in this debate, one can at least recognize and appreciate the philosophical import of ideas such as Pontano’s (and other humanists)—however inarticulate or philosophically naïve perhaps—on the social, emotive and active functions of language, the intrinsic connection of language and sociability, and the semantic principles underlying the grammatical explorations. We might even go further and argue that a comparison with later developments indicates that we cannot leave out Renaissance humanism from the map of philosophical history. As noticed, to many scholars eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers offered a fresh start in thinking about language, compared to the dominant paradigm of the solipsistic Cartesian thinker, silently gazing at his clear and distinct ideas. After an age in which the power of the word was treated with suspicion, Enlightenment thinkers began to underscore the constructive role of language in the formation of thought and culture, no longer viewing communication as a risky affair that negatively interfered with the contemplation of ideas by an isolated individual thinker but as the natural expression of man’s social nature, the natural vehicle by which man gives vent to feelings, emotions, and beliefs. But as the case of Pontano suggests, this picture needs modification. Stimulated by partly the same classical sources used by these later thinkers, Pontano intimated similar views, even employing the term “sympathy” that later was to play such an important role. This does not make the later period less important or less innovative but it helps to soften the sharp boundaries that are still believed to separate the different periods. A neglect of the philosophical dimension of humanist scholarship can easily lead to a denial of its wider impact. Jonathan Israel, e.g., has argued that “modernity” does not owe

⁷¹ To give just one example: Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3: “the ideology of Renaissance humanism is being taken over as part of a historical account of humanist achievement;” cf. *ibid.*, 25 on Garin. Cf. n. 36 above.

much to humanism. Rather, “modernity” could only start with “the overthrow of humanist criticism.”⁷² The new critical methodology of the Early Enlightenment “was not at all [. . .] a gradual, more or less straightforward outgrowth of humanist techniques.” As part of “a wider cultural revolution,” it constituted a fundamental break with the past, including the humanist past. In the light of such an interpretation, my argument as developed in this article can therefore also be taken as a claim—or, rather, a substantiation of the claim already made in different words by different scholars—that once we have become sensitive to the philosophical ideas, assumptions and convictions that undergird the humanists’ scholarship, we need to qualify such an interpretation not only of “modernity” but perhaps also of “humanism” itself.⁷³

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⁷² Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 427.

⁷³ This article has profited from comments made by two anonymous readers, and by audiences at Warwick University, The Warburg Institute, and the Renaissance Society of America Conference in Montréal where I read this paper. I am grateful to David Lines, Peter Mack, and Jill Kraye, and in particular to Matthias Roick for sharing his texts and expertise on Pontano with me.